one's religious beliefs was not a Renaissance development; rather, it existed in the Middle Ages as part of the individual's spiritual life. Medieval Christianity was not a monolithic entity universally accepted, but a space of contention, even for the devout.

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In the English-speaking world Alfred de Musset's dramas remain largely unknown and rarely performed. In the case of Lorenzaccio, this unfortunate phenomenon can partially be attributed to the fact that the script presents enough overwhelming difficulties to discourage most directors and scenic designers. In the Shakespeare Theatre's premiere production of Musset's acknowledged masterpiece, Michael Kahn assembled an artistic team that elegantly surmounted the script's challenges.

John Strand's adaptation of Musset's text represents a marvelous achievement. Working closely with Kahn, Strand transformed a sprawling, epic narrative into a compact, tightly woven, focused drama. Where Musset employs dozens of characters to tell his story, Strand deftly consolidates and streamlines it. Salvati embodies the duke's band of henchmen; the Strozzi clan exists in the essential persons of father, son, and daughter; and the crowds of townspeople and merchants become a husband-wife comic-relief team.

The adaptation works superbly as a piece of contemporary drama. It evokes the cynical wit, the very human characters, the conversational tone, and brisk pace of Shaw's St. Joan or those wonderful Robert Bolt scripts—A Man for All Seasons and The Lion in Winter—of forty years ago. Although Lorenzaccio remains a text deeply rooted in the lively cultural and political context of 1830s France, Strand's adaptation invites a contemporary audience to consider the more relevant contemporary issues that Lorenzaccio explores. Indeed, the significance of any drama that depicts a tyrant propped up by superpowers, corruption, and decadence in

Jeffrey Carlson in the title role of The Shakespeare Theatre's production of Alfred de Musset's Lorenzaccio, translated and adapted by John Strand and directed by Michael Kahn. Photo: Carol Rosegg.
government, as well as sexual deviance and restive insurgency, would be more than obvious to any audience today. To highlight these contemporary themes, Strand humanizes the play’s central character while telescoping a somewhat lengthy and problematic final act.

Lorenzo himself is a multifaceted amalgamation of gender identities. He is pre-pubescent child, protecting brother, mignon, bachelor, coward, bawd, cross-dresser, and masculine hero. His self-image, constructed by all these roles, is that of the ultimate Other. The production shows Lorenzo in all these capacities, and it highlights his alienation, his loneliness. (The obvious autobiographical link makes both this character and Musset alluring case studies for contemporary theorists.)

Lorenzaccio’s pivotal character, Alessandro, is a monster in the play’s original form. Strand’s adaptation reworks several scenes to present Alessandro as a human with monstrous appetites and emotions. This character expansion allows audiences to comprehend Alessandro’s interior life while never forgetting that his weaknesses would consume him. Indeed, Alessandro’s bloody assassination scene, as staged by Kahn, holds considerable suspense and emotional intensity, functioning well as this production’s climax.

Kahn’s staging, along with Strand’s dramaturgy, additionally resolve the play’s fifth act problems while also curiously switching theatrical styles along the way. The script tells most of the story in a straightforward linear, chronological, and fundamentally realistic style, like a traditional Hollywood film. The concluding scene, however, introduces stylized gesture, simultaneous staging, and even a new scenic world. Red walls disappear and a huge, white scaffold lumbers forward. Cardinal Cibo and Duke Cosimo ascend to its top, where they greet cheering masses. Below, a hooded figure of death slowly stalks Lorenzo. In the play’s final moment this mysterious character stabs the yielding Lorenzo and then reveals himself as Piero Strozzi. Strand’s revisions neatly and theatrically resolve the action (and its several subplots), and
provide the audience with a memorable, stunning theatrical climax. Yet, the scene’s aesthetic innovations made me hunger for more such inventive storytelling and staging in the rest of the production.

The scenic design offered the most consistently bold artistic element, combining historical, abstract, and even surreal styles. Ming Cho Lee gave the glossy black stage a gentle rake, enclosing the central playing area with square portaled walls on three sides, each extending upwards towards infinity. These arcaded walls evoked a variety of settings—a piazza, a cloister, a cathedral nave, or a courtyard. A series of sliding panels allowed for instantaneous location changes, creating any number of interior or intimate settings, such as bedrooms, dining rooms, studies, taverns, or walled gardens. The scenic design conveyed mood as well as location; a deep blood red covered the stark, vertical planes of the scenery. Lee also alluded to the play’s political framework, indicating the significance of two important offstage personalities—the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope—with two gigantic portraits rendered in the style of Raphael or Correggio glowing above the scene, both splen-
didly attired and bejeweled. Just as these two power-brokers represented the political will that sustained Duke Alessandro’s despotic rule over Florence, they watched over the dramatic action. The portraits also doubled as metaphorical images of Alessandro and Cardinal Cibo, the two driving forces of political power onstage. The scenic design communicated the harshness, the brutality, and the cold-blooded arrogance that oppressed Florence.

Ultimately, this production of a superb adaptation represents an extraordinary achievement. Michael Kahn and John Strand collaborated masterfully to make Lorenzaccio viable on the stage. Ming Cho Lee’s scenic design complemented their efforts with dextrous skill and stunning imagination. At the two performances I witnessed, the audiences attended closely and responded warmly to this play that they knew nothing about. Artistic directors across the continent should be soliciting copies of Strand’s text for consideration.

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